

**The Action Inquiry Seminar: Education in Democratic Classrooms***By James A. McKernan***Abstract**

This article argues for a more democratic pedagogy in the form of the action research seminar. The procedures for mounting the action inquiry seminar are described and the distinction is made between instruction, training and education. The objectives model for instruction is criticized in favor of education insofar as inquiry-based models cannot specify in advance of teaching the outcomes to be arrived at. The action inquiry seminar is a suitable pedagogy for knowledge production and the development of situational understanding in higher education.

**Introduction**

This paper is aimed at suggesting a pedagogy for more democratic teaching, using action research as a foundation for the graduate (or undergraduate) seminar. The idea is to not only introduce students to a research methodology (action inquiry) but to focus on the role of the chairperson leading the seminar: that is, the procedures required to execute teaching for autonomous understanding and situational insight. Such a seminar will have small group discussion, rather than instruction or training, as its concern.

Historically, I would argue that most teaching is more autocratic and authoritarian than democratic. Students learn to teach the way they are taught I would suggest and we should endorse more democratic methods as a result. I have argued elsewhere for action research and a procedural model of curriculum (McKernan, 2007) insofar as the target-driven “objectives” model of curriculum is more suited to instruction and training than “education”. Sadly this model characterizes much of what goes by the name of “education” in schools as well as in higher education. In pure education we cannot know where the outcome of an inquiry shall lead us, but we can ensure that certain rational standards and procedures be implemented.

The use of the action inquiry seminar provides students with research experience and a voice where they are regarded as equals, along with the professor. Students and teachers seem more comfortable with the notion of “inquiry” rather than the term “research” I suspect, thus the use of the idea of “action inquiry”.

Action research is inquiry that seeks to improve the quality of

human action in a social setting by solving a practical problem posed by the practitioner (McKernan, 1996). I argue that the action research process can be used as the basis for a graduate seminar (McKernan, 1996; 2007).

### Characteristics of the Action Inquiry Seminar

The action research or inquiry seminar is guided by certain rules of conduct, what I have called "principles of procedure". These are the standards by which one can ultimately evaluate the quality of work in the classroom. It is assumed that students should have a voice, an equal voice in a democratic classroom and that the professor is an equal along with the students. All are learners.

1. That discussion is more suitable than instruction as pedagogy.
2. That practical problems, affecting the day-to-day work of students and teachers, become the basis for inquiry and the action inquiry seminar.
3. That the professor has a side responsibility for ensuring that discussions are to the point, that standards are respected, and that the progress of student understanding is monitored.
4. That a student, or a professor, lead a seminar on a special topic by presenting the report of an inquiry into a problem of professional importance.
5. That the seminar participants adopt a critical stance towards the issues discussed.
6. That there is universal participation by the group members.
7. That the group is composed of a small group (six to a dozen members).
8. That the Chair should set limits to the discourse.
9. That the Chair structure group reports around the key features of action research: the plan, the actions taken, the observations made on the reconstructed human actions, the reflections offered, and finally the dissemination of the results (of which one method is the seminar).
10. That the Chair has a responsibility for introducing key bits of evidence and data for the group to consider in the deliberations.
11. That the Chair seeks to clarify issues and concerns and round off discussions with a cogent summary.
12. That the Chair has a responsibility for seeking to build on the understandings of group members.
13. That the Chair is not an instructor or lecturer, but one who guides and facilitates group understanding. It is perhaps better to raise queries than stipulate rhetoric of conclusions.

So, the professor, when acting as Chair of the seminar, keeps and eye on certain principles of procedure (Peters, 1966) as a main mode of evaluating the success of the activity. The professor needs to abandon the role of being "an authority" on all matters but rather, employ the notion of "being in authority" which means he/she has control over the procedures employed. When discussing controversial

issues (value-laden issues) the idea of “procedural neutrality” may be a wise strategy as there are no factual answers to value issues, which are by their nature contentious and divisive. Additionally, it is the responsibility of the Chair to protect the divergence of opinion within the group.

The Chair of the action inquiry seminar thus presents a case of his/her experimental actions with a problem that affects a group’s work. Action research is best approached by raising questions about human actions and results: “How can I improve my mathematics test scores?” Or, “What can be done to have more students complete homework assignments?”

### **Education vs. Instruction**

Instruction hints at information giving and is appropriate when teaching a factual-based content and where one knows what knowledge students require. Training lends itself towards skill acquisition and competency as in athletic development. Education, however, has a strong cognitive component and leans towards development of mind as induction into knowledge. Education comes from the Latin “educere” meaning “to lead out from ignorance” suggests my Oxford English Dictionary, hinting at a nurturing and rearing-up and open-ended constructivist perspective. We know in advance that  $2 \times 2 = 4$ , which is fine for instruction. However, when we are making an original inquiry we do not know what the outcome, or target (objective) is in advance of instruction, and that is why I suggest that an education process is more appropriate than teaching a rhetoric of conclusions in our classrooms (McKernan, 2007). We do not know what students will find when they conduct a survey of pollutants in a body of water, or the understanding they shall gain as a result of reading Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.

The “objectives model” of curriculum (Tyler, 1949) has dominated curriculum design and evaluation internationally for more than half a century. It is centered on what is termed “Outcomes-Based-Education (OBE)” and has serious limitations. It is high time that this assault on education be put in check and that we re-examine our curriculum thinking. The fact is that the process of inquiry and education shall lead us to “unanticipated” rather than “predicted” outcomes. Thus in the action inquiry seminar the Chair will keep an eye on the procedures and make evaluative judgments based upon these observations. The Chair is not looking for pre-specified outcomes for that would make inquiry a nonsensical endeavour.

Education has mainly to do with leading and nurturing the student and with the development of mind. Moreover, it is “intrinsically” valuable rather than because it leads “extrinsically” to a vocation or career. This is the Greek notion of education which was viewed as valuable in its own right, rather than because of what it may lead to. This is the reason that Socrates and Plato abhorred the Sophists, who sold their instruction to students, with promises of

wealth and political careers for the takers.

Education is under attack because the market model advocates see it as a commodity that one can sell to students because it leads to employment and capital wealth. Colleges are seen as production centers where students are produced. It does not seem to occur to institutions that students should be self developing autonomous persons and not products of programs. I argue (McKernan, 2007) that to transform curriculum (and education) into lists of competencies and behavioral objectives is a gross distortion of epistemology and the structure of subjects and disciplines as historically mandated and understood. How can I, as a professor of English, state in advance of teaching, what a student is to know or be like as a result of reading Hamlet?

On the process model of education certain criteria are necessary for something to count as education. Knowledge, as in the disciplines, has its own in-built standards of excellence immanent in themselves. Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) argued that the disciplines do not require justification based on objectives. The disciplines have their own standards, e.g. a logical structure; key concepts which give internal logic; tests of proof in the form of knowledge (theorems, etc.) and modes of inquiry that will add new knowledge to the discipline. Thus they are justifiable in terms of the standards internal to their own disciplinary epistemology. On this reasoning the inquiry based model of the action research seminar is an excellent pedagogy for "education".

A final idea is that of the teacher as an inquiry-oriented researcher and a "reflective" practitioner. The self-autonomous teacher, submitting to inquiry-teaching, takes on a commitment to the development of practical wisdom which is one through his/her own "situational understanding". I argue here that the goal of education is to give us this practical wisdom so that we can be more rational and effective.

## Conclusions

Mounting action research-based seminars will help students to learn not only the process of research but will also help them take responsibility for their own inquiries and results. By observing key principles of procedure (respect for evidence, protecting divergent opinions, tests of proof, etc.) students and Chair shall learn the values embodied in the process of education and democratic classrooms where all have an equal voice. We must commit to the view that criticism and analysis of inquiries help all learn together, in the same way as scholars who are critical of the inquiries of colleagues at say a conference of sociologists learn. Should our students not be treated with the same respect?

The action inquiry seminar also lets us realize that we cannot rest content with some minimal idea of mastery; that is, knowledge is

always provisional -- the base camp for another inquiry -- and that professors and students need to continually grow in their situational understanding and practical wisdom. Situational understanding is not deduced from “middle range” or “grand theory” but is derived from our “grounded theory” that we develop as practitioners. Higher education holds no secrets of life, except through what Michael Oakeshott (1933) has termed “arrests of experience”, those partial perspectives that give us some purchase on experience and the possibility of human understanding, which we call “knowledge”. Most colleges and universities have claims of advancing knowledge. Yet they cannot do this effectively through a dominant instructional based curriculum that imposes pre-specified outcomes as instructional objectives. Institutions of higher education require an inquiry-directed curriculum that seeks to discover knowledge and develop situated understanding among students and professors. Teachers grappling with this claim must also grapple with developing their own grounded theory and advancing “situational understanding”. As college professors we can pose falsely as “experts” or more democratically as “learners” along with our students. That is the case for the democratic classroom using an action inquiry pedagogy.

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